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# REVIEW



— INSIDE —

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- Scanning the Scanner • Show-Bizzing TV News





# WATERGATE & THE MEDIA -- Better Late Than Never !

By Bernard Weiner  
Review Editor

As this is being written, the various Watergate investigations are still going on and the media are still in the midst of their coverage. It is difficult, therefore, to make definitive judgments on what is obviously a fast-breaking daily story and the coverage of which is far from over. But some things need to be said at this juncture, if only to add a bit of perspective to the question of Watergate and the media.

There is an awful lot of self-congratulation in the ranks of reporters and editors these days, as the Watergate story unravels in testimony largely as a result of earlier media investigatory journalism. It is time to take a second look at that earlier coverage and the self-congratulations it has generated.

A prime example, as reported in Aaron Latham's recent *New York* piece on Watergate and how the story was developed: "One night a few weeks ago, word was passed in *The Times* New York newsroom to open up for an extraordinary eight-column head.

"Reporters asked, 'What happened?'

"One reporter guessed, 'The first edition of *The Washington Post* just arrived at the Washington bureau.'

"He was right.

"Night after night, for months, reporters and editors at *The Times* have been able to do little but sit around waiting for *The Washington Post*.

"At one time, *The New York Times* reportedly platooned the Watergate story with a troop of reporters; *The Washington Post's* combination of Woodward and

Bernstein still beat them. *The Post's* young reporters not only embarrassed their rival, *The Times*, but they also defeated a whole system of journalism."

The sad fact is that it took two young metropolitan reporters to break open a scandal — not just surrounding the Watergate burglary and later coverup, but the entire range of political espionage and unconstitutional "dirty tricks" plotted and often carried out by the Nixon Administration — that should have been, could have been, unearthed much earlier by the media.

Radicals, anti-war activists, Black Panthers — and the "underground" media that covered The Movement in greater detail than the Establishment organs — had been talking about spy tactics, government provocateurs, wire-tapping, stolen records, and so on

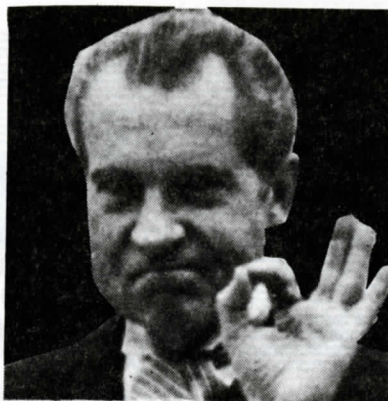




for years. But few, if any, Establishment reporters or publishers chose to nose around and make the connections. Even George McGovern's Watergate comments and corollary charges of massive corruption in the Nixon Administration during the '72 campaign went unchecked as mere political oratory. Later, after the election, when McGovern gave his London speech observing that the U.S. was closer to one-man rule than at any time in the nation's history, about the only reaction from the media was to refer to the South Dakota Democrat as a "sore loser."

I'm not trying to build up McGovern as a simon-pure prophet — the guy's pretty much of a self-righteous bore. What is being remarked upon is the singular unwillingness of reporters and editors to follow through on things that had been staring them in the face for years — from the ITT-Dita Beard episode to the dairy contributions to the aforementioned treatment of dissident elements that received wide publicity in the underground press.

McGovern was taking the media heat during the campaign — as was proper — but Nixon was permitted by the media to escape the same careful scrutiny. As *Washington Post* columnist David Broder has written, "... We must devise some means of equalizing the rules of the game for a presidential incumbent and his challenger . . . Unless future campaigns are to re-



semble last year's travesty, the press cannot allow itself again to be manipulated into being a propaganda arm for the President."

More from Broder in a moment. The point here is that the media chose consciously and deliberately not to probe too deeply into the political and police machinations of the Nixon Empire. And certainly did not attempt to tie all the various police-state actions together. (The fact, for example, that J. Edgar Hoover regarded the Black Panthers as the greatest single threat to the nation's internal security — and the subsequent murderous raids by police departments in city after city on Panther headquarters, such as in Chicago where it was proved that Mark Clark and Fred Hampton were brutally shot to death in their beds. Or the 1970 Nixon Administration bill called the Defense Facilities Act which would have allowed John Mitchell to declare anything from a highway to an industrial plant to a schoolroom a "defense facility," and thus to make "loyalty checks" on employees of virtually any institution in the country and to use military power to control any such "defense facility" in the nation.) The obvious question arises: Why was the media so tame, so timid, so unwilling to report the truth of what was going on?

It seems obvious, at least in retrospect, that the Nixon Administration's broadside attacks on the media — delivered



principally through Vice President Agnew and telecommunications czar Clay Whitehead — produced their desired effect. Not that it turned the generally liberal media around to a more politically conservative position — that obviously was more than the Nixonites could hope for — but in that it made the media lay off the attack, pull in its investigatory horns, ease up on its perspicacious analyses of Nixon speeches and programs.

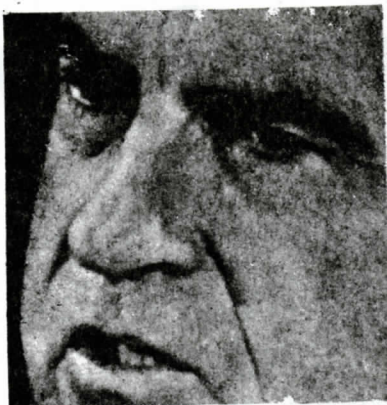
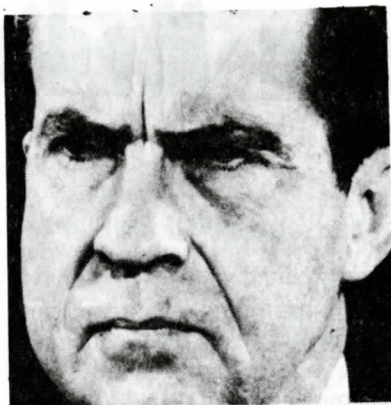
The Nixon media attack could work because media executives and reporters know instinctively (and through the public opinion polls) that a fundamental dislike and mistrust permeates the American public's attitudes towards the media. The media, in its commercial drive for profits and scoopsmanship, has too often distorted the truth, played to the lowest common denominators of intelligence, sensationalized, lied, displayed gross ignorance and incompetence.

In order to be strong enough to be able to ignore such attacks as those coming from the Nixonites, as David Broder notes, the media "requires a degree of public support we do not now enjoy — and probably do not now deserve.

"To earn it, we have to be a lot more honest with our readers about our profession, its value to them — and its limitations.

"We have to start leveling about ourselves and stop trying to outdo the politicians in talking down to the public . . . [to admit that]





every day we print a partial, incomplete version of certain selected things we have learned, some of them inevitably erroneous, all of them inevitably distorted by the need to abridge and by the force of our own preconceptions and prejudices."

[And those prejudices and biases are not simply political or partisan but, more importantly, are social and cultural in origin. Just one obvious example: many people often inquire as to why the *Chronicle's* local reporting is so narrow and deficient. Visitors to the city room can see immediately the overwhelming predominance of white, middle-to-upper-middle-class males in virtually all the key reportorial and editing positions. There are a half-million Spanish-speaking citizens in the Bay Area, but you won't find, say, a Chicano reporter on the staff. These social-economic-cultural facts are bound to determine, even with the best intentions, the restricted kind of coverage emanating from that city room.]

Broder continues: "It would also behoove us to examine our own standards — or double-standards — more closely.

"We could well discuss with our readers, for example, why the same papers that have been so outraged by the threat to civil liberties resulting from the bugging of a party headquarters or the break-in at a psychiatrist's office feel free themselves to print the transcript of secret grand-jury testimony, regardless of the risk to

the reputations of persons who may be mentioned in that non-adversary proceeding."

Which brings us back to Watergate. Broder raises an important ethical problem which has not really been dealt with at length by news directors and editors. I suspect that the reason for this nonchalant attitude is that in the case of Watergate, the truth began to emerge only **because** the media were willing to quote hear-say testimony, secret grand-jury documents, second- and third-hand accounts — and, more importantly, **because** such hear-say reporting turned out to be substantiated days and weeks later by corroboratory evidence and by later public testimony under oath to the official probing bodies. Probes that began to hone in on the truth only **because** the media was willing to risk its neck by reporting such hear-say opinions in the early stages. (What will happen post-Watergate, though, is a matter that deserves careful consideration by editors and publishers. Will media be more tempted now to publish and "play big" hear-say reports and secret grand-jury testimony in murder cases, political trials, etc.? And will the later facts always substantiate the original reporting?)

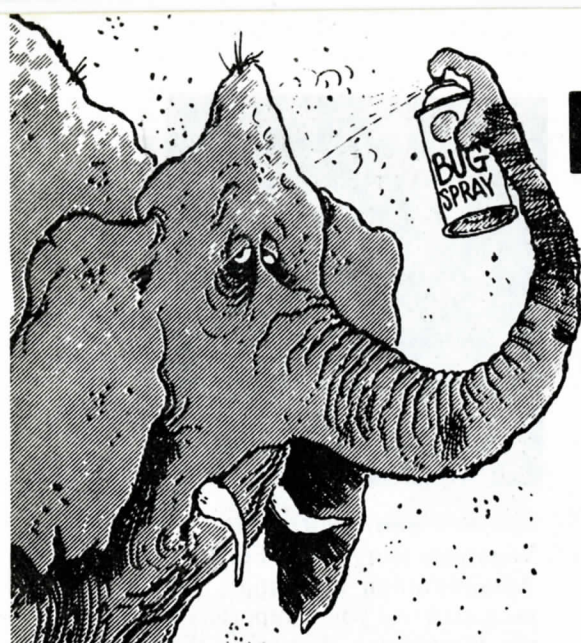
Which brings us around again to the self-adulation currently circulating in media circles. For not only did virtually all media ignore the initial guideposts along the way to Nixon's brand of "national security" authoritarianism,

but they also ignored the early Watergate story itself. Fearful of Administration retribution, they permitted two young reporters on the *Washington Post* to do their digging for them, and to risk the symbolic guillotine of government response. The gamble of *Post* publisher Katherine Graham was enormous. "The Nixon Administration had called the paper every kind of name," Latham wrote in *New York*. "And everyone at *The Post* had known that if the paper was wrong about the Watergate, then it meant that Richard Nixon was right about *The Washington Post* and American journalism."

Well, the gamble paid off. Woodward and Bernstein, in their extra-cautious way, maneuvered through the minefields of phony leaks, self-serving politicians and official harassment to shape a story that, at its conclusion, could well lead to the removal of a President of the United States. All the awards they and their paper have won are more than deserved, and all American journalism stands in their debt for their accuracy and for the depth and range of their reporting. But we should not forget that it was their initial work that opened the door and that since then, very few other journalists have taken the cue: one can point to a few reporters on the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, and a few on other publications (especially the anonymous probers at *Time* and *Newsweek*, and a few at scattered

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# How Bay Area Media

Locally, Watergate coverage varied from reproduction or re-writes of reports emanating elsewhere, mainly from the East Coast (*Washington Post*, *New York Times*, etc.), to a good deal of creative production on the part of various media.

**KSAN-Radio**, for example, broadcast its highly regarded "Watergate Follies," which recapped not only the daily testimony but added some well-needed humor amid the various con-

spiracy theories to lighten the listeners' load. **KPFA-Radio** broadcast gavel-to-gavel coverage of the Senate hearings (as did **KQED-FM**), and provided nightly edited versions of the day's testimony along with significant commentary from the Pacifica station's Washington-based correspondents. **KQED-TV** interrupted its yearly fund-raising auction to broadcast a tape of the full Ervin hearings in prime time.

The *Chronicle*, which sub-

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papers elsewhere), but by and large, investigative reporting — on Watergate or on anything else — continues to be conspicuous by its absence. Where are the Woodwards and Bernsteins in Bay Area journalism, for example?

Watergate has forced the Nixon Administration to back off a bit in its attempt to create a weak and easily manipulated media (the compromise "victory" for public broadcasting control, the apologies to the press from Ron Zeigler and Nixon himself, the relative quiescence of Agnew and Co.), but actions on other, less-obvious fronts are by no means all so optimistic:

- CBS has decided to abandon its immediate commentary after presidential speeches. As columnist Carl Rowan has observed: "At issue is the basic question of whether the President shall be able to commandeer the radio and television networks and hand out whatever information, line, propaganda he chooses, without anyone on the networks to explain, challenge, dispute what he has said or claimed."

"It is beyond understanding or explanation that CBS would gag itself at a time when the public needs in the worst way media with the guts to challenge instantly and courageously top men in the

executive branch who have grown too powerful and too inclined to confuse, where possible, and just plain lie, where necessary."

- The Administration continues to push for a little-publicized revision of the U.S. Criminal Code. Under the proposal, any government employee who turned over to "an unauthorized person" (say, columnist Jack Anderson or Senator Barry Goldwater) any of the 20 million documents now marked secret or some other classified status would be guilty of a felony, and could be popped in prison for a several-year term. Any reporter who published any information classified as secret would be guilty of a felony — and any publisher or broadcast executive who okayed such publicizing of the classified information could also go to prison on a felony charge. (Locally, *Chronicle* columnist Charles McCabe — a traditional defender of the rights of privacy and civil liberties — is about the only journalist to devote space to this vitally important possibility.)

- On major story after major story, the national and local media demonstrate their lack of preparation, knowledge, and competence — and their willingness all too often to become little more than conduits for government propa-

ganda. The snow-job the Pentagon did on the media with regard to the Vietnam War and the return of the American POWs, covered in the last issue of this *Journalism Review*, is only one blatant example. The vast majority of the media were equally as easy for the government to manipulate at Wounded Knee — moving all reporters away (without any judicial protest) from the area of the conflict and feeding them handouts, often blatantly untrue, from Pine Ridge, which many reporters and wire-services reported as fact day after day. (Of those reporters who did get inside Wounded Knee, many were just as easily manipulated by Indian press-agency; see Terri Schultz' report, "Bamboozle Me Not at Wounded Knee" in the June *Harper's*.)

In sum, our sins of commission and omission are legion and before we can expect to be publically supported in our fight against totalitarian attacks from the government, we must clean our own house and do a job professional enough to merit public support. As David Broder concluded about the media's Watergate euphoria: "Let us be modest in our moment of triumph, ladies and gentlemen of the press, for, as the old saying goes, we have much to be modest about."



# Handled the Watergate Scandal

scribes to the key wire services, was one of the few newspapers on the West Coast to provide readers with the daily investigative results of the *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* — and many Bay Area radio and TV stations relied heavily for their own wrapups upon the morning *Chronicle* revelations.

The *Journalism Review* questioned various Bay Area media news executives on their Watergate coverage. The responses reveal much about the local handling of the story.

All the editors and news directors surveyed said that they thought the local media were relatively fair in their coverage. Indeed, as one editor said, the coverage was "perhaps still more conservative because of prior attacks" on the reliability and fairness of the press. KNTV (Channel 11) said that initially the broadcast media tended to be extra-cautious in relying upon newspaper reports but now there is "much more credibility than initially awarded."

A key question asked the news executives was whether Watergate was a story conducive to radio and TV development in its early investigative stage. One editor said that "TV has been backward. CBS has been best, but all have been afraid." Another, from K101-Radio, said: "Nuts! CBS (Dan Schorr) helped break it open."

KGO-Radio said "the argument doesn't hold water. Radio can deal with these things — IF we maximize our strengths (immediacy, ability to present the voices of newsmakers, good solid interviews, etc.)."

The example of KGO-Radio is an impressive one, which deserves amplification. What follows is their explanation of how they used those unique assets of radio news production in reporting on the

Watergate story as it developed daily. It's too bad so many of the other local radio, TV, and newspaper outlets couldn't, or didn't, do something similar.

"Due to a unique programming format, we've been able to handle this story in some depth.

"KGO programs news & talk all the time. On 'The Morning News,' from 5 to 9 AM, Owen Spann talks with newsmakers to give some depth to breaking stories. We use both in-studio and telephone interviews. So, when the Watergate story started to break, it became obvious that most information was going to come out through a cadre of journalists, and we attempted to set up contact with many of them.

"Not in any particular order, here are some of the people we have talked with live in 'The Morning News' on various aspects of Watergate:

"Winnie McLendon, Washington newswoman and pal of Martha Mitchell, Nick Horack, *Newsweek* (on his cover story on John Mitchell) Hal Lipset, S.F. Private Investigator (on his Watergate investigations and firing) Helen Thomas, UPI (on Martha phone-calls re Watergate) Walter Mears, Political Writer for AP (how will Watergate affect the GOP?) Shana Alexander, *Newsweek* (her Watergate column) Arthur Egan, *Manchester Union-Leader* (gambling funds used in bugging payoff) Pete McCloskey, Bill Mailliard, Allan Cranston (reac to Nixon Watergate Speech) Congressman John Emerson Moss (calls for study of impeachment procedure) David Murray, *Chicago Sun-Times* (GOP Senators put pressure on Nixon to act) Aldo Beckman, *Chicago Tribune* (Nixon reac to Percy's call for independant prosecutor) George Gallup, Gallup poll (how Americans view Nixon's

handling of Watergate), William Theis, Wash. Bureau, *S.F. Examiner* (Goldwater reac), John Osborne, *The New Republic* (cover-up attempts), Hayes Gorey, Senior Correspondent, *Time Magazine* (Dean will testify against Nixon). Howard Simons, Managing Editor, *Washington Post* (*Post* Pulitzer), Frank Van Riper, *N. Y. Daily News* (Mitchell will be indicted), John Gardner, Common Cause (GOP disallusionment), Miles McMillan, Madison, Wisconsin *Capitol Times* (says Proxmire told him "Nixon's up to his ears") Robert Boyd, Bureau Chief, Knight Newspapers, (White House attempt to smear Ervin) Charles P. Taft, Cincinnati attorney and head of the Fair Campaign Practices Committee ('72 campaign was the dirtiest)

"Morning Co-anchorman John Lynker was in Washington for a week and filed live reports and situationers, Morning Anchorman Owen Spann was traveling in the Mideast and reported on Israeli reac to Watergate . . etc."

Most local media chose to rely heavily for facts on the usual sources (*Washington Post*, *L.A. Times*, *N.Y. Times*, *Time* and *Newsweek*), and said they felt relatively comfortable in doing so.

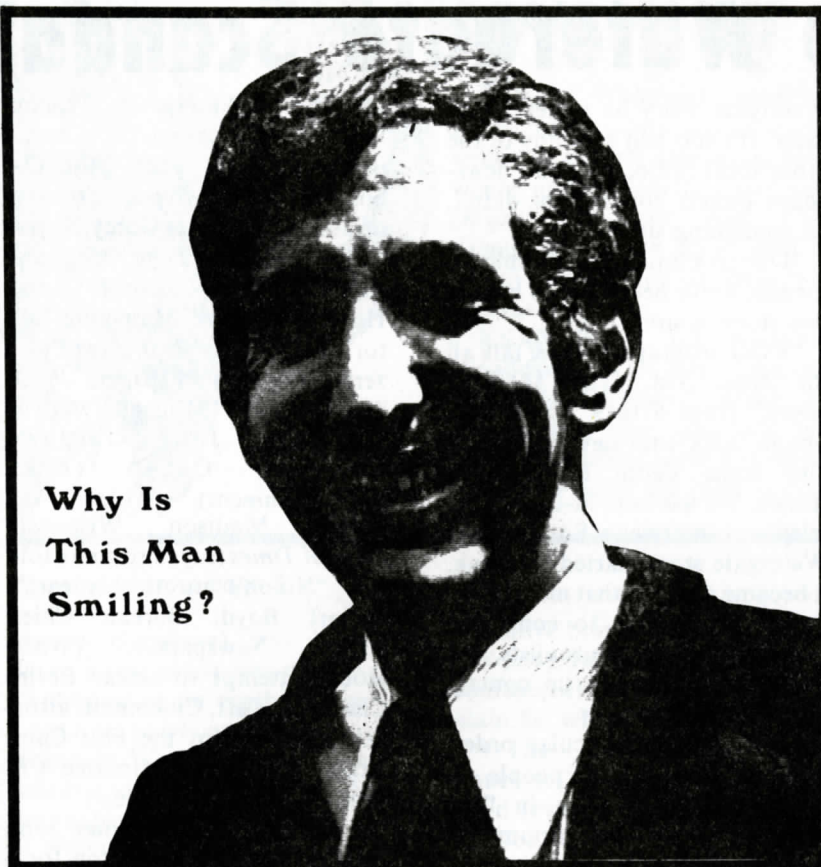
However, there was some shared sentiment with the comment of a KQED-TV news executive that "all the media could have done more, obviously [in the way of early investigative work]. And it could have started some years back, not cowering, when the Administration began its attacks on the press and its functions and duties."

The news executives were asked if they detected any sense of gloating on their staffs over the difficulties of the Nixon Administration as a result of Watergate revelations and, if there were such feelings, whether that affected the

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## Why Is This Man Smiling?



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way the Watergate stories were played or edited. Some editors noted some sense of self-satisfaction in their news rooms, but said it didn't seem to interfere with the fairness of their coverage, and all said they thought a Democratic scandal of such magnitude would have been handled similarly.

A **K101-Radio** executive said that "reporters/investigators would have gone after anybody suspected of playing this way." A **KGO-Radio** exec said "there may be some gloating going on, but we had better not get caught at it . . . the public is watching mighty closely."

From the *Chronicle* to **KCBS-Radio** to **KNTV** to the various other radio and TV stations, almost all the news executives surveyed said they realized the ethical problems associated with play-

ing hear-say reports and testimony so big in reference to Watergate but indicated that in a story of this scope and with the amount of governmental secrecy being exercised, the media more or less had to go with such hear-say reporting in the initial stages **as long as they were extra-careful in clearly labeling the reports as attributed and hear-say testimony.** As a **KGO-Radio** executive said, the key was to "attribute carefully, and let the public decide."

They were quizzed on reactions from their readers and listener/viewers. Almost all had had fairly heavy reaction as to their coverage — the extent of it and the fairness of it — and most said they tended to be cognizant of such reaction but that their primary responsibility was to follow their news instinct where it led them. A typical reaction was this one from **KGO-Radio**: "At the beginning, we got some (listener) response

that we were playing the story too heavily. That dropped off as the mud-hole got sloppier. Recently, a couple of remarks that people are tired of hearing Watergate, but no suggestions that we are wrong in playing it heavily."

**KQED-TV** reported that response from its viewers was "quite favorable to hearing replay, somewhat negative (and usually along political lines) on our own interpretative stuff and commentaries (so labeled)." After the initial negative reaction from soap-opera fans about the Senate committee hearings on the commercial channels, stations tended to receive heavy favorable comments from viewers intrigued by the parade of GOP heavies before the dramatic eyebrows of Sam Ervin.

Finally, the media executives were asked whether the heavy Watergate coverage meant that other important stories — such as the continuing Indochina War in Cambodia and Laos, and even in Vietnam — tended to be handled in less depth. The general reaction was that there was some tendency to "downplay" such stories because Watergate was taking up so much space/time, but that this was natural with any story of the magnitude of Watergate and that though the coverage of other important news was somewhat slighted, such news was always covered to some degree.

(Final note: A June 14th Gallup Poll reported on nationwide reaction to the media's Watergate coverage. About 44% of those surveyed in early June — i.e., before the "big boys" came before the Senate Watergate Committee — felt there was too much Watergate coverage, 38% thought there was just enough, and 11% wanted more. It will be interesting to see how these percentages shift as the probe goes higher and higher and as the media become more involved in reporting the various denials and counter-denials.)